"Bargain War"

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How successful are the Soviet troops fighting in Afghanistan? During a second visit to the resistance forces, in late 1980, I found that in some respects the Russians were improving their tactics. For example, soon after I entered northeastern Pakistan with a group of five resistance fighters, one of my companions reached out abruptly to stop me from stepping on a mine that lay a few feet ahead on the mountain path. It was the size of a pack of playing cards and covered with green plastic which blended easily with the moss-covered ground. Walid, my translator and the leader of our group, took a photograph of the mine before he threw a rock and exploded it. These antipersonnel mines are scattered in the mountains by Soviet helicopters. They explode only when someone steps on them and they can easily blow off your leg. They are relatively ineffective against insurgents traveling by day but they prevent guerrillas from moving through the hills at night, particularly if they are accompanied by caravans of camels. By contrast, when I first visited the resistance groups last summer, we often traveled at night.

The Parcham faction now running the Afghan government which the Soviet Union brought to power in late 1979 has, moreover, been able to organize defense forces in the villages along the border, something the preceding Khalq regime was not able to do. Aside from ambushes on the roads, most of the skirmishes we observed followed a similar pattern: lightly armed guerrillas attacked mountain villages, forts, or military outposts held by the army, which then responded with heavy machine guns or, more often, mortars. The outcome in most cases was largely symbolic: there was no gain for either side, although such skirmishes can be unsettling for Afghan army soldiers, who feel isolated and vulnerable in these mountain outposts.

In other cases, however, the Russians won decisively. A band of some 300 resistance fighters was surrounded by Soviet troops between September 24 and 27, not far from the towns of Sao and Shal in Konar province. After two days of artillery fire and bombing, Soviet "black beret" paratroopers were dropped from helicopters. "They were very fast," Walid told me, "faster than us, and good shots. When it got dark, they began to shoot flares from the hilltops, and the fighting went on throughout the night. For two days we had no food, no way to defend our position. It was raining, a hellish two days." There were few survivors among the resistance fighters. A similar operation took place in September in the Panjshir valley. Then in late November Soviet and Afghan troops began a campaign to drive the guerrillas not only from the Panjshir valley but also from the provinces of Baghlan, Parwan, Logar, Wardak, and the border region of Paktia. This continues today.

What have the Soviet troops achieved during the year that they have occupied Afghanistan? Until now their strategy has proven very effective, largely because they have avoided the mistakes made by the French in Algeria and the Americans in Vietnam: they have not tried to overrun the country with an expeditionary force of some 500,000 men, and so have not been burdened with an enormous force of largely unneeded soldiers who would have been expensive to feed, and of whom only 10 to 15 percent would have been useful in fighting the resistance. Instead the Soviet Union has chosen, whether for political or economic reasons, to occupy Afghanistan with an army of only about 80,000 men—enough troops to assure control of the major cities and roads in the country. And for the most part, these troops are inconspicuous; they are rarely seen at all except in Kabul.

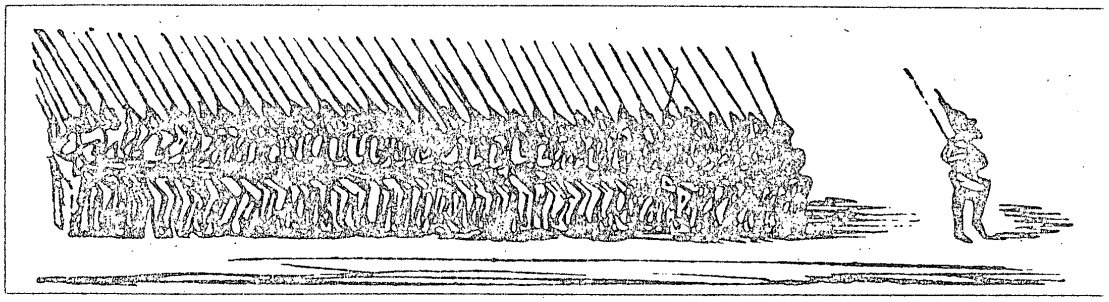
Since 1978, nearly half of the 80,000 men in the Afghan army have deserted to the resistance forces, often taking their arms and even their ammunition. But the soldiers who remain have been able to hold the government's positions on the Pakistani border, where the regime maintains a fairly dense line of invulnerable outposts. During the last year, mines have been planted around these camps; the resistance fighters, with their inadequate armies, have been unable to harass them effectively. The soldiers rarely leave the forts to pursue guerrillas into the surrounding countryside.

Soviet troops move in armored columns that are also largely invulnerable to guerrilla attacks. Most of the mines and other explosives the guerrillas have used until now have been of such poor quality that they are rarely able to damage a tank. The insurgents have few antitank guns, and Soviet losses have been very moderate. Soviet vehicles are also protected by armored helicopters which intervene quickly whenever a tank is attacked. Airborne Soviet troops were not used until recently, and they remain rare even today. But if they prove effective, they may in the future be used more widely to prevent offensive attacks by Afghan resistance fighters.

The Soviet troops and the regime they installed in power have had some success in organizing the tribal people in the eastern mountains. In order to gain the allegiance of tribal chiefs who, for various reasons, were not sympathetic to the rebels, the Russians made payments to Moslem groups in Konar, to the Shinwari tribe in the Nangarhar, and the Mangal and Jaji tribes in Paktia. Not surprisingly these alliances have created difficulties for the resistance, particularly since Afghan traditions hold that no reconciliation is possible once blood has been shed.

But during this first year of occupation, Soviet activity has been concentrated in the cities, particularly in Kabul. The Soviets were concerned above all to impose order. To do so, they have tried to build up the administrative organization of the Parcham faction, which had been badly weakened by the rival Khalq faction the USSR supported in 1978, after the coup against President Daoud. And they have replaced some Parcham functionaries with Soviet administrators. The Soviets have also improved transportation into Afghanistan and are setting up large numbers of economic projects that will help increase trade between Afghanistan and the USSR. In Kabul this summer special identity cards were distributed to merchants to help the Russians control travel into and out of the city. These measures also help prevent resistance fighters from infiltrating the bazaar.

And yet the regime still cannot count on much support among the people in the cities. It has not even been able to recruit enough young men to maintain an army of 40,000 fighters, although by Afghan standards army wages are considered good: a noncommissioned officer earns 6,000 afghanis, a militiaman 3,000 to 4,000 afghanis, i.e., between 90 and 120 dollars. The insurgents' networks in Kabul remain largely intact and they claim to have supporters even in certain units of the Afghan army. On several occasions students have organized street demonstrations against the regime. Soldiers in Kabul are threatened by terrorist attacks, and last December on the anniversary of the invasion, there were several riots which the government punished by arrests but not by mass killing. Some important administrators have also refused to collaborate with the regime, and many skilled and educated people have left the country—an erosion of the professional classes that has undermined the regime and the resistance alike.



But the cost of the Soviet strategy in Afghanistan has, until now, been very moderate. The Russians have lost little equipment, and the estimates of casualties announced to the Western press by the resistance and by "diplomatic sources" in New Delhi have been much exaggerated. Some reports have suggested that in September alone the Soviet army lost 1,500 men. From all I saw, this seems most unlikely. I suspect the Soviet army in Afghanistan has lost no more than a few thousand soldiers during the past year—hardly more than the number that might ordinarily have been killed during peacetime military exercises.

Although at one time the Western press tended to overestimate the guerrilla forces, it has now become fashionable to take a more disparaging view. What is not said in these more skeptical accounts is that few resistance groups, whether Asian, African, or Latin American, have had to fight under such unequal conditions. Also unnoticed, and even more important now after a year of occupation, is that the morale of the

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Afghan resistance has not been broken. The insurgents have not yet suffered a fierce unrelenting attack like the anti-guerrilla campaign in which General Challe destroyed the Willayas in Algeria in 1958 and 1959, or the "search and destroy" missions and Phoenix operation that the US carried on in Vietnam in 1969 and 1970.

The outcome of the first year of fighting is thus uncertain. While the resistance movement has not been broken, the insurgents are badly organized and much divided among themselves. They lack skilled technicians and effective local leaders. What heavy weapons they have are poorly distributed. Instead of being widely dispersed among a large number of insurgents as they are now, these weapons should be concentrated among a few small fighting bands that could be effective in sabotaging tanks. If the resistance is to be more effective, many of the guerrillas should be reassigned to more useful tasks such as producing food for other fighters, organizing food reserves, clearing mines, or gathering and spreading information.

For the most part, the peasants are thought to be favorable to the resistance, but if they are to be used effectively, they too must be reorganized, either along tribal lines or in networks based on traditional patronage. Soviet and Afghan troops have already caused a large number of peasants to flee from their homes in the provinces along the border. A year ago there were approximately 400,000 Afghan refugees across the border in Pakistan. Today there are more than one million—some estimates run as high as 1.4 million—some of them driven from their land, others simply frightened by the fighting. As a result the guerrillas traveling through the border region often have trouble finding enough to eat. The antipersonnel mines that Soviet troops have scattered in the eastern border provinces create further difficulties. Until the various guerrilla factions can put aside their differences and better organize the rural populations, they will continue to have trouble defending themselves against the heavy weapons and armored vehicles of the Soviet troops.

Even today, they cannot be said to be fighting for a clearly defined new government; they are united only by their rejection of Parcham's centralized authority. Local opposition to the land reform and literacy campaigns that were initiated by the Khalq regime originally produced the resistance movements and they continue to oppose abrupt changes in their traditional tribal society. They reject the atheism of the Marxist-Leninist government, and they contest any extension of state bureaucracy. They also object, increasingly, to occupation by a foreign power—the first foreign occupation in Afghan history.

The goals of the six major resistance groups are often contradictory. The most extreme faction, the fundamentalist Islamic Party of H. Gulbuddin, uses torture and frequent purges to maintain a party line derived in part from the example of Khomeini's Iran. Gulbuddin opposes modernization and scorns Western liberal ideas. But he also opposes traditional spiritual figures like S.A. Gailani and S. Mojadidi, both leaders of rival resistance groups descended from prominent Moslem families within the Afghan religious establishment. Gulbuddin's commitment to revolutionary Islam leaves no room for the tribal allegiances and religious conservatism of Gailani and Mojadidi. He also disproves of their Afghan nationalism, which is in fact inconsistent with the limited provincial nature of their support and the strength of their ties with local tribal chiefs. Gulbuddin's is the only major faction that does not belong to the loose coalition of resistance groups based across the border in Peshawar.

The largest insurgent group is the Islamic Revolutionary Movement led by N. Mohammadi, which despite its name rejects Islamic fundamentalism and is currently threatened by an internal schism. Several other small factions remain divided from the rest because they appeal exclusively to particular ethnic peoples such as the Nuristanis or Hazaras, notwithstanding agreements of cooperation that the Nuristani commander called "Anwar Khân" is reported to have made with leaders of both the Hazara and Kunar peoples.[1] The few groups that appeal to leftist ideologies are almost entirely without popular support. None of the factions has put forward a charismatic leader capable of overcoming the differences that divide the movement.

The fierce independence of the guerrilla fighters is at once the movement's most important strength and its greatest weakness. The rebels' determination has not softened during the past year of inconclusive skirmishes. They continue to fight in the flamboyant style of traditional tribal warriors—showing a kind of personal heroism that can be effective in isolated incidents but that also tends to work against the efficient military organization that the resistance movement so badly needs. In opposing the Marxism-Leninism of the regime, the insurgents have, for better or worse, much reinforced their own traditional values. Many resistance fighters in Kabul, for example, who took no part in organized religious practices only two years ago, now make some point of observing the Islamic schedule that calls for praying five times a day. The propaganda of both Khalq and Parcham points out that history and progress are on their side, while the resistance groups are said to represent reaction and obscurantism.

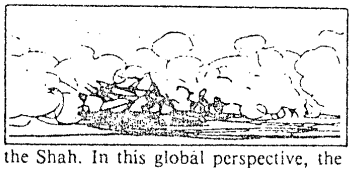
An even more pressing problem today is the rebels' lack of arms and ammunition. In this, there seems to have been no improvement between my first visit in June and my second in October 1980. The guerrillas are still fighting with British Lee-Enfield rifles left over from the Second World War and with Kalashnikov automatic weapons made in Egypt. Heavy artillery is still in short supply, as are the mines and other explosives the resistance needs to fight Soviet tanks and armored helicopters. The new American administration may undertake to supply them, perhaps clandestinely. Already there are rumors circulating in Peshawar that some Afghan insurgents are being trained to use SAM ground-to-air missiles.

Until now the invasion of Afghanistan has had few serious repercussions for the Soviet government, whether internationally or at home. The reaction among Western countries has been extremely reserved: a limited boycott of the Olympic games; an American grain embargo without much consequence since other countries such as Argentina [illegible] to the USSR; a gradual reduction of American technological aid. Several Western European countries including France have denounced the invasion, while increasing their trade with the Soviet Union. Many Europeans also seem to accept the idea that the USSR has a privileged interest in Afghanistan.

In explaining the intervention, people often refer to Soviet fears of a fundamentalist revolution among their own Islamic population. In fact, the USSR does not fear Islam; that is a Western fantasy. The Soviet "empire" is in no danger of "exploding"; the invasion of Afghanistan may indeed have been welcomed by some Soviet Moslems as increasing the proportion of Moslems in territories controlled by the USSR.[2]

Even if the invasion is seen as a "defensive" measure designed to strengthen a floundering communist regime, it seems clear that Moscow was concerned above all with the kind of territorial aims that have always guided Russian policy in this region. The USSR has strengthened itself by increasing its territorial margin of safety—a kind of defensive aggression that is familiar enough in Soviet history. Even if Pakistan and Iran are not today threatened by the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, the USSR is now in a much stronger position to lean on either of these countries if the need arises, and also to counter what it sees as Chinese influence in Pakistan.

The USSR has taken advantage of the regional instability caused by the fall of



the Shah. In this global perspective, the Soviet stake in Afghanistan is secondary, but not unimportant. As for Pakistan, although it is a poor, weak country, it has recently been given a reprieve by the World Bank's decision to roll over its debt for the year 1980-1981, and by a $1.5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund. This will, for the time being, put off financial crisis in the country that provides sanctuary for the Afghan resistance.

In early February, *The New York Times* reported rumors that Pakistan, under pressure from the USSR, might during the coming months enter into direct talks not with the Kabul government but with the Afghan People's Democratic Party—talks that would exclude the resistance groups. The report implied that the Pakistanis might be willing to make a deal by which the flow of weapons to the rebels would be cut off and the Soviet Union would make a gesture of pulling out some of its troops—thus carrying Moscow closer to its goal of gaining international recognition of the regime it installed in Kabul. The report was vehemently denied by a Pakistani official who reiterated his country's commitment to "total withdrawal" of Soviet forces.[3] The war could go on for a long time. □

—translated by Tamar Jacoby

[1] See the report by Mike Barry in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, January 26, 1981, pp. 64-65.

[2] See Alexander Bennigsen's article, "*Les musulmans de l'URSS et la crise afghane*" in *Politique étrangère*, June 1980.

[3] See Bernard D. Nossiter's report in *The New York Times*, February 5, 1981, and the official denial published in *The New York Times* on February 11.